

Increased Support for Smoking Bans in Public Places

Fri, Jul. 15, 2011 Posted: 02:15 PM EDT

More than half of Americans say they now support a ban on smoking in public places despite the drastic drop in support for prohibition-like laws that would make smoking totally illegal in the United States.

A new Gallup poll issued on Friday shows that 59 percent of those asked support a ban on smoking in public places across the country. This is the first time since Gallup began asking the question about tobacco bans in 2001 that the polls showed such a significant change in support of the measure.

Since 2003, the percentage of Americans favoring smoking bans has grown by six to nine percentage points.

The proportion of smokers who feel unjustly discriminated against because of restrictions on smoking in public places is significantly higher today than six years ago, according to Gallup.

However, public-opinion analysts say support for the control of smoking through legal means goes only so far. Only two in ten support the idea of making all smoking illegal across the country.

"There is a difference between smoking bans in public places and outlawing smoking altogether because then you are telling people how to live," said Martha Dent, a resident in Mobile, Ala.

"Smoking in public places affects other people but smoking in general is a right we have in a free country. Government should fit like a nice coat, not a straight jacket."

Gallup found in 2009 that only 17 percent of Americans said smoking should be made "totally illegal" in this country.

Gallup has never found overwhelming support for a universal smoking ban "perhaps partly in recognition of the practical difficulties involved in enforcing such a wide-spread ban," the report said.

The aim for such tobacco bans is to safeguard the health of the public from being exposed to secondary smoke inhalation by making sure that tobacco products are smoked only in areas designated for smoking.

The tide started to turn in 2006 across the country and in North Carolina on the issue of smoking regulations. The U.S. Surgeon General issued a report that year concluding "there is no risk-free level of exposure to secondhand smoke."

A flurry of smoking regulations hit the country prohibiting tobacco use in state government

buildings, state vehicles, schools, prisons, long-term care facilities, as well as the federal restrictions banning smoking on all airlines.

A number of states and local municipalities started adopting their own legislation by passing laws banning smoking from public places including public parks, beaches, restaurants, lodging establishments, and entertainment venues.

Privately owned businesses have jumped on the ban by prohibiting tobacco use in their facility.

Generally, if a smoker continues to smoke after being notified either orally or in writing to stop smoking by the person in charge of the facility, the smoker may be cited by a law enforcement official for the infraction.

The punishment for such an infraction can cost anywhere from \$50 to \$300, depending on the state or city.

"Local rules allow people to choose a town with rules that work for them," said Edward L. Glaeser, an economist at Harvard University. "If parents want to bring up their children in a smoke-free environment, then it is a good thing that they can choose a town that bans smoking."

However, Gallup's recent findings follow a report on state tobacco control laws by the American Lung Association that show a dramatic drop in the number of states passing smoke free laws during the last three years.

"We hope this dramatic slowdown in the number of states going smoke free doesn't continue," said Thomas Carr, director of National Policy for the American Lung Association. "It is imperative that all states put in place comprehensive laws prohibiting smoking in public places and workplaces."

Gallup's recent poll also shows that cigarettes smokers are cutting down on the habit.

Research shows the number of smokers has dropped significantly over the years. About 30 percent of smokers say they smoke a pack or more each day. More than half smoked a pack or more a day as recently as 1997, according to Gallup.

The Surgeon General's latest report on tobacco use, "How Tobacco Smoke Causes Disease: The Biology and Behavioral Basis for Smoking-Attributable Disease," shows that there is no risk-free level of exposure to tobacco smoke.

The Surgeon General also said that the evidence that secondhand smoke is a serious health hazard is clear, convincing and overwhelming.

"Workers in all public places and workplaces need and deserve protection from it," the report said.

It is interesting to note that studies show high cigarette taxes keep children from starting to smoke, motivate adults to stop, and reduce future tobacco-related health care costs.

Researchers found that due to budget constraints several states have drastically cut or

completely eliminated funding for tobacco control programs designed to prevent kids from starting to smoke and help smokers quit, according to a report by the Tobacco Control Program.

This report revealed some interesting facts including a study that showed if all states met their recommended tobacco control funding level for five years, there would be about five million fewer smokers.

This would result in the prevention of hundreds of thousands of premature tobacco-related deaths.

Results for this Gallup poll were based on telephone interviews conducted July 7-10, 2011, with a random sample of 1,016 national adults, aged 18 and older, living in all 50 U.S. states and the District of Columbia.

Did you know?

Secondhand smoke can cause harm in many ways. In the United States alone, each year it is responsible for:

- An estimated 46,000 deaths from heart disease in people who are currently non-smokers
- About 3,400 lung cancer deaths as a result of breathing secondhand smoke
- Other breathing problems in non-smokers, including coughing, mucus, chest discomfort, and reduced lung function
- 50,000 to 300,000 lung infections (such as pneumonia and bronchitis) in children younger than 18 months of age, which result in 7,500 to 15,000 hospitalizations annual
- More than 750,000 middle ear infections were diagnosed in children during the last year due to second-hand smoke
- Pregnant women exposed to secondhand smoke are also at increased risk of having low birth-weight babies

Source: American Cancer Society

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